

Access and Disabilities Working Group - Thursday, 26 November 2020 1.00 pm

Minutes

Present:

Cllr Rachel Eden, Chair

Cllr Tony Page, Lead Member, Planning, Transport and the Environment, Deputy
Leader - RBC -Lead -Reading West Station

Clare Muir - Policy and Voluntary Sector Manager RBC

Helen Bryant - Access Officer RBC

Jill Marston - Senior Policy Officer RBC

James Turner - Transport Planner RBC

Steve Wise - Transport Planner RBC

Adam Bevington - Digital and Website Manager RBC

Nina Crispin -Information & Engagement Officer - Public Health and Wellbeing
Team RBC

Aisling Gill-Dougherty - Placement Student RBC

Isabelle Redfern - Rehabilitation Officer (Visual Impairment) Short Term Team RBC

Nisa Unis - COVID-19 Communications Engagement Officer RBC

Yvette Toome - Talkback

Stuart Pearce - Guide Dogs

Trish Wright - Member of the Public

Bob Bristow - Reading Association for the Blind

Rona Topaz - Learning Disability Support

Jenny Turner - Readibus

Apologies

Shahanaz Uddin - Healthwatch Officer

Brian Oatway - Member of the Public

Karen Sutton - (?)

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Cllr Eden welcomed everyone, gave a roundup of what was to be discussed and explained how the online meeting would work. There were no captions for the meeting, but the meeting was to be recorded (video and audio) and there would be a chat function which was speech to text.

2. COUNCILLORS' DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None (Councillor Page was in attendance to observe and listen to the Reading West Station item) and looked forward to hearing the presentation and comments.

3. MINUTES

It was noted that the incorrect minutes had been circulated and it was AGREED that the Minutes from the previous meeting 5th March 2020 be circulated with the Minutes of this meeting.

3. READING WEST STATION

James Turner introduced the item, reporting that there had been a new application submitted to the Council with some updates since the last application was published. These included minor changes to the road and bus interchange, and a building on the road, which would include ticket gates, a new retail unit and an accessible toilet. The retail unit was for station users and passers-by alike.

There would be an entrance off the northern side off the pavement. The Oxford Road was at the top of the plan. There was a ticket office to the right-hand side and the retail unit on the left-hand side and access to both platforms via the steps on either side.

The scheme did not include installation of lifts to platforms because the platforms were not wide enough, and Network Rail had said that there would be safety issues because of regulations; the station would have to be rebuilt. Provision for lifts was to be included for the future.

Improvements to the highway would be made - the building would sit underneath the railway bridge on the Oxford Road and the roadway moved slightly to the north, to ensure that there was adequate space for the building and for the southern pavement. The bus shelters would move slightly and cycle storage would be provided, together with CCTV. The pedestrian crossing would move and would be upgraded. Other enhancements would be made in the area.

The programme was to start the works in February or March - Reading Borough Council would carry out the highway works and then Great Western Railways would deliver the station works following that. The construction period would last around 12 months. Great Western Railway was the planning applicant.

Further documents were on the Reading Borough Council website.

Councillor Eden thanked James for the presentation. She invited questions.

Rona Topaz asked if a ramp could be installed instead, and that accessibility seemed to be a low priority.

James said that access was very high on the Council's priority list to provide access for all users, and asked Stephen Wise to comment on the history of the scheme because it had been ongoing for a long time. The Council would very much like to provide lifts and was hoping to work with Network Rail to find the funding to make this possible. The scheme was accessible; there was to be an accessible WC, and staff members would be in attendance for longer hours than they were currently who would help passengers. There were ramps available on the platforms to assist passengers on and off trains.

Stephen said that currently the funding was not available, and the Council had used the funding that was. Further funding would be looked for and the Council would be putting pressure on Network Rail to install lifts and make the station accessible.

It was recognised that the station was not very pleasant to use, and that improvement was needed. There was an issue with anti-social behaviour. More investment was needed by Network Rail to make the station a better asset, and to get Network Rail to recognise that.

Stuart Pearce said that without the lifts, the station was not actually accessible, and asked with all the buildings that are being put in, how much space was left on the pavement, because there were already obstacles such as bike racks, which made it very difficult for blind people.

Stephen Wise said that the footprint of the building was taking some of the space from the north pavement which was quite empty, which gave more space on the south side, the cycle racks were to be positioned in the corners, which were not in the pedestrian zone.

Stuart said that it was a station that he used, and the biggest problem that he had was the access from the platform to ground level. There are many steps to come down to the Oxford Road and asked if the steps would be changed.

Stephen said that this had been looked at, it wasn't possible at the moment, but in order to get the correct gradient for the ramp it would have to be taken back a long way, it would be very long, and it would have needed to have at least one turn. It would have been very difficult to use.

Stuart said that without a ramp or lifts there was no improvement to the station for disabled people apart from an accessible WC. It didn't make the station any better.

Stephen said that this had been recognised, and that the Council had been trying to find a solution with Great Western Railway and Network Rail and had not been able to do that. Unfortunately, the railway company and the railway industry in general did not consider Reading West to be a valuable station, and it had been very difficult to engage with the necessary partners. The Council was in a good position to go back to the Thames Valley Local Enterprise Partnership and, when further funding was available to request it for lifts.

Network Rail had its regulations, and it was difficult to make them see from the point of view of the users of the facilities. Without this building work the railway industry might not have justified the costs of modifying the station. The station was useful despite the bad facilities. The Council had to do what it could to raise the profile of the station.

The Chair shared a comment from Rona that the lifts had not been prioritised by Network Rail and the budget was obviously limited.

The Chair said that the remit of the Working Group was to say that this was a station that should be accessible and made so, and that the Group strongly supported that view and wanted to see the investment that was going into the station to enable accessibility improvements when the budget was available.

Another issue was the pathway; more detail was needed and that it was important that users were involved in the review and to have the views of people who might be using the pavements in a different way from those on foot that the planning was done so that there were no obstacles to the use of the pavements. This was especially important for wheelchair users, people with mobility issues, visually impaired or blind people.

Cllr Page thanked those who had made comments and said that Reading West was probably one of the most challenging stations on the network, and that Green Park, which was just down the track and was nearly complete, was a great improvement.

It had full access including lifts and an overbridge, and some elements had been referred to Planning for further work to ensure that they were of the highest standards. Reading West was a different matter; Network Rail had insisted that they could not allow lifts to be installed until the platforms had been rebuilt to the appropriate width.

At an earlier meeting Network Rail set out how the platform width varied, and it would be extremely dangerous to put lift on platforms of uneven widths. He hoped that the Working Group and individual Members would continue to lobby Network Rail and Great Western Railway to bring forward funding to improve platform widths to allow the lifts to be installed, as it was the platforms that would be the more costly improvement.

Pressure needed to be kept on the local MPs.

Cllr Page said he had recently met with the new Neighbourhood Inspector who had a personal interest in the security of the station; he had had a briefing and was liaising with British Transport Police. There was to be new CCTV at the station which was to be monitored and controlled by Reading station and the Council. The project enabled staffing of the station for much more of the day than before, and the cameras and barriers would give enhanced security which had not been delivered before. The retail facility would be a benefit to passers-by which would contribute to the staffing at the station.

There had been controversy when inappropriate designs had been released into the public domain; new designs had been received by the Council and were to be put on the website. Cllr Page urged the Group members to look at the plans and to comment; they were an improvement on the previous ones.

The Chair suggested a letter be written to the appropriate people to ensure that access was taken into consideration and that it would be helpful if users could be involved in the design of the pavements.

Cllr Page asked Stephen and James if there were to be tactile paving at the station.

James said that there had been a stage one road safety audit on the scheme, which had come back with minor recommendations; the next stage would be to look at materials and finish and go into more detail. The next stage was to be looking at materials to be used and colours, and the Working Group could be involved in this.

The Chair suggested that if members of the Working Group wished to be involved then either she or Helen Bryant would put people in touch with Officers.

She thanked James and Stephen for the presentation.

4. EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON DISABLED PEOPLE

The Chair said that disabled people all over the UK had been badly affected by the virus - more than most of the population. Jill Marston, Nina Crispin and Nisa Unis shared a presentation (attached).

There was a brief discussion in the chat about appropriate terminology and language. Rona said that although she could not speak for everyone, people preferred to be known as disabled people, rather than people with a disability, as the latter defined disabled people by their impairments. "Disabled people" came from the Social Model of Disability and placed the burden on society to become more accessible, thus making disabled people less disabled, if their needs were met. She said she also preferred "additional" rather than "special" needs, which she felt was an alienating word. Clare and Nina acknowledged her points and would keep them in mind.

Rona said that she was not criticising the presentation or the presenters, but we should not be debating right to life when it came to disabled people - it should be a priority.

The Chair said that she knew someone who was frightened that they would not get treatment in the early days of the epidemic. the vaccine uptake was something that needed to be monitored carefully.

Liz said that, regarding reduction in transport as mentioned in the presentation, Readibus was still in operation although passengers were limited. They were taking patients to hospital appointments as well as the usual trips.

Stuart said that the Reading Hub had been a lifesaver for a lot of people, including himself. Getting food had been a struggle. Reading Hub had been one of the best things to happen.

The Chair said that she had been made aware of issues such as people needing food, which had not, with the exception of foodbanks, come up before, and knowing that there was a hub to which she could refer people was very useful indeed, and had probably saved lives.

Stuart said that the phone calls that had been made to check that people were all right had also been very important and welcomed.

The Chair said that staff members from the Council had been redeployed from their usual jobs and many had had to retrain. It had been a great effort and showed the strength of the community working together.

The Chair said that if any of the members had concerns about the impact of the pandemic that they should raise them with Helen, Clare or whoever might be the most appropriate person; if the Council did not know about the issues then Officers could not do anything about them.

The Chair asked that the members of the Reading Hub, Adult Social Care Team and Public Health Team be thanked as they had been doing a difficult job in very difficult circumstances, and lives had definitely been saved.

6. ACCESSIBLE COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Clare Muir shared a presentation - attached

The Chair said that a question had been asked about the production of Easy Read documents and confirmed that these and other formats could be provided by the Council and other partners.

The Chair said that input from the Group would be very useful.

Clare said that Adam Bevington was also in the meeting and could update the Group regarding the Council's website.

Adam said that the Council was working with the Shaw Trust to achieve accessibility and that the work was underway to sign off the site to their accreditation level in line with the Government's new standards, which had come into being in September, and the report could be shared with the Group.

Bob Bristow said that he had been told that the website had been tested with screenreaders, but it was still very difficult to find things.

The Chair said that she had also thought that things were hard to find on the site, but she did not have to use a screenreader.

Adam said that there was another review that needed to be done, and that the Council was working with a Government accessibility testing laboratory to ensure that the site was easy to use by all. There was to be a user group and people were to be invited. Members of the Group were welcome. Clare said she would come back to the group with more detailed proposals on the policy.

7. AOB

Bob said that Sarah Hunneman had sent MP3 files to him for the Reading Talking News newspaper. This paper would reach about 100 people.

Nina said that someone that she had spoken to who had been unable to attend the meeting wanted to enquire about the Warm Up Grant up to £5000. Nina said that she could find out about it.

It was noted that there had been an article in the Reading Chronicle regarding the Crisis Café, but there was not much information about it.

Helen said that there was to be a meeting of the Task and Finish Group regarding 5 plans for an accessible play area which was to take place the week of 7 December. If any members of the Group wanted to join the meeting, they should let Helen know.

The Chair said that there had been quite a lot of accessible play being planned, there had been a lot of work with Palmer Park and there was the play area off Portman Road. Every child in Reading needed access to play. The work needs to continue.

The Chair thanked the Officers who gave presentations and all who had participated.

7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

4 March - on Teams.

There was a discussion about future meetings; The Chair said that maybe hybrid meetings - both online and face to face - might be a useful way to conduct meetings. There might be a way to do this. She said she would like to see this. Some schools were moving towards it.

Bob said that online meetings are in some ways easier than face to face because everybody was at the same volume level rather than hearing voices across a room.

The Chair said that the meeting had been very positive.